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LANGUAGE IMMERSION: FRIEND OR ENEMY OF INDIGENOUS MINORITIES?

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'Language immersion' has been regarded with suspicion for roughly two decades by many educators wishing to be loyal to the goals of bilingual education in indigenous groups. In this paper I argue that we should not be suspicious of immersion in a generalised way as an approach to both first and second language teaching among these groups. Rather, we should define those conditions under which immersion might be dangerous and those under which it might be helpful to the language aspirations of indigenous minorities.

'Language immersion' first became a phrase of suspicion in the mid seventies when some educators tried to use the results of the French-English immersion programs (after Lambert and Tucker, 1972, became so widely known) in order to question the need for bilingual education in indigenous group schools. If having virtually all formal primary schooling in L2 (second language) worked for one group it should work for all, so the argument ran. But 'language immersion' also, later, began to become a phrase of admiration as news began to spread of a few successful language revival-by-immersion programs, especially the Kanawake Mohawk immersion program in south east Montreal. Kanawake is not all that

far away from where the French-English program began in St Lambert, another suburb of Montreal. As well, some second language learning theorists, also knowledgeable about bilingual education, seemed to support the value of immersion. For example, Wong Fillmore and Valadez (1986:672) suggested that the best L2 English learning results in bilingual programs seemed to suggest that immersion approaches (where L2 is a language of instruction) combined with ESL approaches (where L2 is learned as a language) was a sensible way to go.

Bilingual education remains a controversial model of education. Even long established bilingual programs such as that in Pitjantjatjara lands in NW South Australia, can come to an end with policy changes (see Rose 1993 and Harris 1993). So, in cases such as the Pitjantjatjara program, if resurrection of the bilingual program seems unlikely in the short term, it is important to have the best alternative approach available.

TWELVE FEATURES OF SOUND LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAMS.

What then are those circumstances under which immersion is a sound approach to language learning, in relation to either L2, or L1 (first language) where it needs to be revived or maintained in an indigenous group? The following principles have been gleaned mainly from Cummin's 1984, chapter 7 especially p 159, Genesse 1989, chapters 2 and 3 and Wong Fillmore, 1991. Before beginning this

exercise, readers are reminded that the phrases 'L1' and 'L2' can no longer be automatically associated with the traditional language/mother tongue, and the national language respectively. In the case of immersion revival programs the L1 of parents can be the L2 of their children.

The twelve principles are:

1. *L2 at no cost to L1.* Immersion is sound when the target language can be effectively taught without threat to the other language. Put another way, genuine immersion should be seen as one form of maintenance bilingual education, or additive bilingual education, even when the school involved does not take responsibility for formally teaching the other language. Put another way, if the home really is maintaining the other language strongly, then immersion in the target language is probably a good approach.

2. *Immersion not submersion.* Immersion is a genuine option when it is not submersion. Submersion has two main features: L2 input is not properly comprehensible (Krashen, 1981: 66), and L1 is not strongly supported socially outside the school.

3. *L1 high status.* L2 immersion has been most successful where L1 represents dominant sectors of society. For example, in the French-English immersion programs students' L1 was arguably the highest status in the world.

The high status of English has been emphasised here in contrast to high SES (socio economic status) of the parents, which used to be offered as one of the factors of success of some immersion programs. But SES does not seem to be the main factor. In a study in Milwaukee (see Cummins 1984:163) low SES Blacks whose L1 was English

did well in French, German and Spanish immersion programs. Here high teacher expectations and high academic self-esteem built by the teachers, seemed to be the accompanying crucial factors. Also, during a visit to Canada in 1992 I was told by several academics that L2 English immersion for L1 French children in Quebec and Ontario did so well that many French parents became concerned about it being too successful (ie. at the cost of French) and in many cases stopped the programs. This is a particularly interesting example of the power of language status in view of the fact that there are six million French speakers in Quebec and in view of the status of French as a major world language.

Another example of the language status principle is Wong Fillmore's (1991) 'no cost research project' where she gathered evidence that L2 English immersion for Spanish students in the USA seemed to be happening at the cost of Spanish.

In the case of English immersion for Aboriginal students the issue of language status needs serious consideration. A strong vernacular literacy program and strong L1 maintenance program would appear to support the status of L1 and thereby make L2 immersion both more viable and less harmful.

4. *L2 medium of instruction.* In a successful language immersion program, getting the job done through the language is the main emphasis: not appreciation of the language; not learning the language itself. In the French immersion program academic proficiency - that is, learning the subject content - was the goal. Appreciation of French and even fluency and good pronunciation in French were welcome bi-products only.

5. *L2 at least half the instructional time.* To qualify as immersion L2 must be 50% or more the language of instruction. A program can still qualify as immersion even if it is begun at various stages of school and is in various proportions beyond 50%. It is mostly begun in Kindergarten or Year 1.

6. *L2 by direct method.* Successful immersion teachers tend to behave as if they are L2 monolinguals, even though most of the time they are fluent bilinguals. Translation from L1 is allowable in the beginning stages but is phased out soon. This is commonly the case in the Canadian French immersion programs.

7. *Bicultural teachers.* Successful L2 immersion teachers are highly familiar with the student's L1 language and culture, and L1 language and culture is respected in the school even if not directly taught. Students' L1 identity is never under threat.

8. *Homogenous classes.* Immersion classes are normally homogenous: students are from the same culture and are of the same academic level. This allows comprehensible L2 input to be more easily and effectively monitored. (I assume Cummin's 'L2 modified input' (1984:159) is close to Krashen's notion of comprehensible input). Latest theoretical statements about second language teaching seem to continue to emphasise the importance of comprehensible input. (See Trim, 1992:10 for current confirmation.) In this context one of my own views in relation to teaching English to Aboriginal children is that comprehensible input is difficult to achieve because teachers often do not accept that language teaching is culture teaching. If more English cultural general knowledge were taught,

or experienced, many more Aboriginal learners of English would have the contextual background necessary for English comprehensibility.

9. *Domain separation practical.* In Canada, at least in those French immersion schools where some L1 teaching continues, domain separation is maintained between French and English. That is, the same school subjects are not taught in both languages. Generalisability of this principle to all successful immersion programs is not claimed, though the policy seems sensible. It might be worth noting that while there is domain separation between school subject and language in the French immersion programs, outside school this kind of separation is much less likely. In fact one of the strengths of the French immersion program is that what students learn through French is readily transferred to English. This probably happens so readily because of the relative closeness in world view between French and English societies and their relatively high proportion of shared background and contextual knowledge. The arguments for and against domain separation between, say, Yolngu and English, are quite different because of the degree of difference between world views.

10. *In-class student communication in L2.* In immersion classes students are encouraged to communicate to each other in the target language.
(See note 1)

11. *Strong parental support.* Genuine immersion programs enjoy strong parental support. When this happens the students are, thereby, genuine volunteers. For a program to contain genuine volunteers there needs to be an accessible and socially acceptable al-

ternative school which children can attend. This is true for French immersion programs in Canada. It is well known that Aboriginal children in community schools virtually have only one option. In the light of the principles being listed in this paper, that one-option situation could be said to be obsolete and even undemocratic. There does not seem to be any good reason why the days when a school has to choose to be either bilingual or not bilingual need to be maintained. In their place could be schools within schools. Class sizes could be maintained by vertical grouping. There could be a small bilingual school and a small L2 - only school within the same school. This is a timetabling and programming problem, not an insurmountable problem. When children get the kind of schooling their parents want, schools are more likely to get parental support.

12. *Promotion of L1 literacy.* Successful L2 immersion seems to be associated with L1 literacy promotion, whether inside the school or at home. One of the important values of L1 literacy may well be its contribution to L1 status, which in turn may well be an important factor in L1 language maintenance (see McConvell, 1992).

EXAMPLES OF LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND LANGUAGE REVIVAL PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS GROUPS.

Mohawk immersion schools.

There are three Mohawk immersion schools, all with different approaches. (see Regnier, 1987; Shopen, 1979, chapter 1; Cummins, 1991:5-6).

The Mohawk Survival School, established in 1978 is the oldest. It is in the Mohawk 'suburb'

of Kanawake, in SE Montreal, a community of 5 000 people. The community is English speaking, while many people over 40 still know Mohawk. The school has about 250 students and is funded as a regular suburban government school under Canada's decentralised school system. Years K to 3 have 100% Mohawk, and Years 4 to 7 have 50% English. The school is staffed entirely by bilingual qualified Mohawk teachers. Much of the curriculum seems to be learned by rote, and much of it is translation of English curriculum. The Mohawk Thanksgiving Prayer plays a central role in the students' school socialisation. The students appear to be highly fluent in Mohawk in class, but speak English to each other in the playground. This school achieves high academic results in English, with graduates passing on to high school without any particular difficulty. There are several 'orthodox' English schools close by which students can attend if they wish. The Kanawake school has been an inspiration to many, and produces many fluent speakers of Mohawk, in spite of the criticisms by some other Mohawks that the Mohawk spoken is a translation of English and therefore lacks some carriage of Mohawk world view.

The Akwesasne Freedom School, founded in 1979, is situated near the industrial city of Cornwall, 100 kilometres south of Montreal, and is also in a largely English speaking Mohawk community of 5 000 people. This school of about 70 students receives no government funding and survives by its own fundraising and gifts from organisations such as the Quakers. Immersion is 100% Mohawk from kindergarten to half way through year 6 when English is used for the last six months prior to high school. The staff are qualified Mohawk teachers and bilinguals and use a much more contextualised, activity-based, interactional language teaching methodology than that used at Kanawake. Parents are asked to do some English academic work with their children at home. The students use more

Mohawk outside the classroom than do Kanawake students, and also do well at high school. The Mohawk Thanksgiving Prayer has a central role in the students' learning.

There are two immersion schools, founded in 1988, at Six Nations, a largely English speaking community of 15 000 Iroquois in southern Ontario, one school for Mohawk and one for Cayuga, with about 70 and 100 students respectively. (Cayuga is one of the six members, along with the Mohawks, of the Iroquois Confederacy which ruled a substantial portion of NE USA at the time of European settlement.) The staff are largely not qualified as teachers and are mostly middle aged people from the community, and that school is government funded as if it were an 'orthodox' school. Its progress is monitored by government school system officials. In 1992 the parents were divided on whether or not English should become the main medium of instruction after year 5 or whether all primary schooling should be in Mohawk or Cayuga. Much of the classroom content comes from translations of English curricula. Students have a choice to attend English schools nearby if they wish.

Navajo at Fort Defiance.

The Navajo revival program was commenced in 1986 at this 900 student K to 5 school. It operated in two each of the seven K, Grade 1,2 and 3 classes, and dropped to one only of the seven grade 4 classes. Fort Defiance had had a successful bilingual program in the past but with many population changes the students did not know enough Navajo to sustain a traditional bilingual program. So a group of parents decided to try bilingual education through immersion. The prime aims were not to preserve Navajo, but to help kids in school work and to help them value Navajo-ness. The classes were not homogenous. The students controlled a range of Navajo and a range of English. Attendance in the Navajo classes was by parent choice. The Navajo program was total Navajo immersion, with real academic work, real content and real communication. English

was taught for twenty minutes a day by a different person. The results in both Navajo and English were good at third grade. The biggest problem was the availability of Navajo teachers. The program was, in its fifth year, a victim of changing educational ideologies of an incoming Navajo principal. The approach had been inspired by that of the Kohanga Reo in New Zealand. (See Arviso and Holm, 1990)

Hawaiian on Hawaii.

Here a revival program was begun in 1988. Hawaiian is no longer a language of regular usage but many adults are still fluent speakers. This is a state government program operating in five schools with 250 primary children from 80 families. 100% immersion in Hawaii is maintained until the end of year 4. From year 5 on the students have one hour per day in English. Assessment results show that these students achieve normal performance in English literacy, probably because they pick it up outside school. (See Slaughter, et al, 1991 and 1992.)

Kohanga Reo in New Zealand.

These 'language nests' began in 1982 and now operate for children of 0-5 years in 800 sites with hope that by the turn of the century 75% of all Maori children will attend them. The approach is based on 100% Maori immersion with 'grandmothers' - mostly over 55 - providing the language and social context. The movement began without government funding, but now draws substantial government resources. These 'nests' are one focus of a nationalistic movement. (Such a movement may as Paulston, 1986, has suggested, be a prerequisite for successful language revival. In all the examples listed above it would be reasonable to say that the parents of indigenous immersion revival schools are expressing nationalistic tendencies.) The Kohanga Reo movement seems to consist methodologically of contextualised family life conversation, participation in Maori ceremonies, and learning many songs and speeches by heart. (See Spolsky, 1989; Fleras, 1989.)

Other Programs

Principles of language development through language immersion are potentially useful whether the program is one of maintenance (where the language is still spoken in all generations, but is *under threat*); of *revival* (where older people still speak the language); or *resurrection* or *reclamation* (where there are no living speakers of the language). There are examples other than those above of language revival schools, among the best know are those in Hebrew, Gaelic and Welsh. Cornish in Cornwall is enjoying a partial resurrection and infants schools are one of the agents of that. In Aboriginal languages there are few bilingual schools and outstation/homeland centre schools which have language maintenance as one of their main purposes. In Aboriginal languages a good bit of work on revival is also taking place, for example, in parts of the Kimberlies, Barklay Tableland(NT), and Cape York and even in languages such as Banjalang near Casino on the northern NSW coast. Language reclamation or resurrection is still fairly rare in Aboriginal languages. Perhaps work at the Kurna Plains School north of Adelaide is the best established and other work in Kurna and Ngarrindjeri is opening up new hopes for 'dead' Aboriginal languages. (See Amery, in press.) Work in Awabakal (see Heath, 1981) in the Newcastle, Port Macquarie region of NSW is another example of efforts towards language reclamation. (See Amery, 1984, for a national survey of work taking place in these various types of programs) (Note 2).

GENUINE IMMERSION?

The twelve principles discussed earlier in this paper, while they don't operate all immersion programs, do provide us with means of rough evaluation as to whether or not our second language teaching approach is likely to have the advantages of immersion without loss to the first language. The evaluation could simply consist of checking off in relation to particular schools the teaching situation against

these twelve principles:

1. L2 at no cost to L1?
2. Immersion, not submersion?
3. L2 high status?
4. L2 medium of instruction?
5. L2 at least half the time?
6. L2 by direct method?
7. Bicultural teachers?
8. Homogenous classes?
9. Domain separation as practical?
10. Inter-student classroom conversation in L2?
11. Strong parent support?
12. Promotion of L1 literacy?

My own judgement is that the only principles which possibly might be considered optional out of the dozen are principles 8,9 and 10.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to facilitate language teacher evaluation of their second language teaching approach, both in terms of whether or not they are likely to succeed in relation to student growth in the second language, and in terms of whether or not that growth is without cost to another language important in the student's life. In this context I also believe that to maintain or revive an L1, even if it never regains a role as a language of everyday interaction but is a language of identity, is an important achievement if that is all the context reasonably allows. Finally, schools which have opted, or are thinking of opting for a switch from bilingual education to some form of two-way schooling or English-only schooling could use this checklist as a guide to whether the chosen form of schooling incorporates a sound language teaching approach. We now know that for children with more than one language in their lives, a sound language teaching policy cannot be developed in relation to either language without first calculating what the effects are likely to be, both from the other language and on the other language.

NOTES

Note 1: I wish to express appreciation to Paul Black for reacting to an early draft of this paper. He made a valuable point here: "I can see that homogeneity in academic level would affect the comprehensibility of input. At the same time, cultural/linguistic diversity can actually be an advantage in language teaching, since the lack of shared L1 forces students to interact with each other in the L2."

Note 2: I also wish to thank Rob Amery for feedback on this paper and for drawing my attention to the Heath reference.

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